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CANADIAN, U.S. MAYORS END OBJECTION TO LAKE MICHIGAN WATER DIVERSION

A group of mayors from Canada and the U.S. has dropped its challenge to a decision allowing an American city to draw water from the Great Lakes, saying it has secured an agreement to improve the review of similar applications in the future.

The Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative said it reached a settlement with the council representing eight states that gave the Wisconsin city of Waukesha the green light last year to divert water from Lake Michigan.

The decision from the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Basin Compact Council made Waukesha the first exception to an agreement banning diversions of water away from the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River basin.

The city of 70,000 had requested the water diversion because its groundwater is contaminated with naturally-occurring radium, a cancer-causing substance. It argued that the decision allowing it to pipe water from Lake Michigan was error-free and protects the environment.

Waukesha's request had created significant concern on both sides of the border, with critics arguing its plan could open the floodgates to other communities seeking Great Lakes access when they face water shortages.

The Cities Initiative, which represents more than 100 local governments on both sides of the border, had challenged the approval but said this week that their fight had been settled with an agreement that includes a review of how regulators consider water diversions in future.

"It now puts our voice a little bit better heard when it comes to dealing with other applications," said Randy Hope, the mayor of Chatham-Kent, Ont., who is on the Cities Initiative's board of directors.

Hope noted, however, that Great Lakes communities like his had felt they had been left out of the decision-making process in the Waukesha case.

"It just didn't seem like it consulted wide enough or broad enough," he said, noting that concerns over the American city's request included worries that other communities outside the Great Lakes Basin from as far as California could make similar applications in the future.

"Once you start drawing too much water out of the system, and it doesn't have its natural replenishment going on, you're going to run into problems," he said.

According to Hope, the council is committing to gather opinions from communities both near a diversion and in other parts of the Great Lakes Basin for future requests.

John Dickbert, the CEO of Cities Initiative, said regulators would be looking for more input from three broad groups — Great Lakes communities affected by water diversions, the scientific community, and organizations like his own group.

"You need to make sure that the communities are part of the conversation from day one," he said.

The Great Lakes support 33 million people, including nine million Canadians and eight of Canada's 20 largest cities, according to the federal government.